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TWO I KNEW IN MARSHALL

By Max S. Lale

James Moyers already was on the staff of the *Marshall News Messenger* when I joined on January 6, 1946, after fifteen months and four campaigns in Europe during World War II. James was home after a brief stint in the Navy during which his only blue-water cruise had been a ride to Guantanamo Bay.

James thus was the first of the two Moyers brothers with whom I established a friendship, one that continued until James' untimely death at age thirty-nine, on September 17, 1966, while working as a speechwriter for President Lyndon B. Johnson.

James' brother, Billy Don Moyers, was still a schoolboy in Marshall in 1946. Now, of course, he is a television broadcasting icon and a successor to Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite in that pantheon of over-the-air legends. We are separated by the distance between Texas and New York City, but our friendship continues.

Because of these friendships, I also came to know their parents, Ruby and Henry Moyers. With the latter I also later worked for Thiokol Corporation, a defense contractor, at Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant (LAAP) near Marshall – he as a timekeeper and I as a communications expert.

My friendship with James Moyers was warm and subjective, the two of us being of a similar age. On a relaxed afternoon in Washington, after President and Mrs. Johnson had helicoptered away from the city to visit their ranch in Texas, I promised James in his office in the White House annex that I would keep an eye open for the well-being of his parents. Occasionally this promised over-sight extended to refreshing Henry's summertime vegetable patch with a garden hose while the parents were on a lengthy out-of-town visit.

I also had been preceded in the editorial staff not only by James but also by Sam Stringfellow. My understanding of the timeline was that Stringfellow was the first World War II veteran to return to Marshall. He therefore became the first male to join the all-female staff with which publisher Millard Cope had worked during the war. I do know that as the senior reporter Stringfellow covered the better beats, including City Hall. Eventually, Sam disappeared into the mists of my memory.

Not so James, however. While yet a member of the *News Messenger* staff, he became an adjunct journalism instructor at East Texas Baptist College (now University) in Marshall. This broadened James' grasp of his craft, as did a much larger opportunity later. Almost by default, he became the central go-to guy in the "Marshall housewives rebellion" for members of the national press following the story.

This story involved several housewives in Marshall who decided they would "rebel" against paying Social Security contributions for their domestic

help. In this they were following Connecticut doyen Virginia Kellums, who said such a practice would make her an unpaid tax collector for Uncle Sam. Syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler became involved in the Marshall story, as did Representative Martin Dies and others on the right wing of the political spectrum. James had his first taste of dealing with a major story.

These experiences led James to a job as a communicator for one of the sulphur giants on the South Louisiana coast, for which he became a vice president. One of the last times I saw James, aside from a brief visit at President Johnson's inauguration, was during a visit in my office at a Marshall insurance agency. He recounted to me then his hope of buying one of two daily newspapers then being published in Shreveport, Louisiana.

It was then, too, that James told me how he had been recruited as a speechwriter at the White House. While out of town and sleeping in his hotel room, his telephone rang at 6:00 a.m. President Johnson himself was on the line, making James an offer. James said he told the president he would have to tell his boss about the conversation. "My boss told me if I did not accept, I would no longer have a job with his company," James said.

There had been a hiatus in my association with younger brother Bill Moyers while he was out of town growing up. These were the years when he studied at what is now the University of North Texas in Denton and at the University of Texas at Austin, spent a year at Edinburgh University in Scotland, returned to Texas and Southwestern Theological Seminary in Fort Worth for his master's degree, and served a stint as pastor of a Baptist church in the Hill Country.

Millard Cope had taken Bill under his wing while Bill was still a school-boy. Impressed with the youngster's intellect, Cope had assigned him some stringer work, including covering a local school board meeting. When the assertive, even arrogant, chairman of the board called Cope to complain, Millard suggested that the chairman wait until the newspaper article was printed and then call if there was a problem. There was no call.

When Bill transferred from Denton to Austin, Cope called then-Senator Johnson to recommend Bill for a job at the family radio station in Austin. Bill worked there while earning his bachelor's degree. As president of the Marshall Rotary Club, Cope likewise had been instrumental in Bill being awarded a scholarship to study at Edinburgh.

While James and I were writing obituaries, rewriting club handouts, and doing such other mundane work as covering Saturday night conventions of the controlling Democratic Party, Bill busied himself with his high school studies and ran for president of the student body. I had been hired to replace a sports editor who had gone to Austin to work for the Associated Press. Both of us did the kind of assignments which fall to general reporters on a small newspaper – special editions and other routine tasks.

Millard Cope, whose guidance and counsel Bill later honored by naming his first-born Cope, was not alone in recognizing Moyers' potential. This

schoolboy in the backwater of a racist South was being nurtured by three master teachers in high school. They were sisters Selma and Emma Brotze and Inez Hatley Hughes, who together taught Bill English and, more particularly, writing.

Much later, this posed a difficult choice for Bill when he was asked by a national education group to nominate a teacher for a gold medal. He nominated Selma Brotze, resulting in an ugly telephone call to Bill's mother from Inez Hughes, who felt she should have been the choice.

This clergyman-journalist did not emerge full-blown, Botticelli-like, from a clamshell in the rural South. He was pictured in *The News Messenger* as a member of the cast (all white) on a high school play. There is a tale told somewhat reluctantly by a man still a resident of Marshall of a prank when the two were roommates at Denton.

Nathan Goldberg, a realtor, and his office manager, Hazel Lavender, remembered one such story many years later. The real estate office was in a glass-fronted building on East Austin Street in Marshall. Hanging from a canopy in front was a small sign announcing the business.

As it happened, the Moyers family then lived farther east. Making his way afoot from the high school one day, Bill approached the Goldberg office. Impulsively, Bill jumped at just the right moment to send the sign crashing to the sidewalk. His father, Henry, had to offer compensation for the damage.

Writing an introduction to a book many years later,¹ Bill wrote that he and the author (Bernard Rapoport) had grown up "very poor" ... The poverty he knew in San Antonio was the equivalent of 'dirt poor' in East Texas. It either broke your heart or bit your ankle."

Each of these men, twenty years apart at the University of Texas, knew the way out of their difficulties, in Bill's case thanks to the guidance of his Marshall tutors. "Even the \$40 tuition was beyond my parent's means. Yet there, spread out before us in a library larger than my entire high school, were stacks upon stacks of books, available for the asking," he wrote in the introduction to his friend's book.

How James might have realized his full potential by escaping his own difficulties, as his brother has, can only be speculated. I am certain Bill did so, as I have. As pall bearers at James' funeral we waited while mourners left the chapel – this after a memorial service in Washington attended by President Johnson – and Bill stood for long minutes at the coffin, no doubt pondering the same thought.

What were the odds that two brothers, children of wise but largely uneducated parents, would have emerged from a racist backwater to such eminence? It is a puzzle for students of leadership.

In the case of the younger brother, no doubt exists. Clergyman, scholar, author, confidante of men in high places and member of a storied legion that includes names such as Murrow and Cronkite, Bill's place is assured. It must

be acknowledged, nevertheless, that long residence in the East and long association with members of his constituency have cost Bill some of the affection his more conservative homefolk have extended to him as spokesman for their small city.

In my own case, this has not been true. When he retired from *Now*, his long-running Public Broadcasting documentary program, I wrote to congratulate Bill on his illustrious career in journalism. I noted that our attitudes about governance had diverged over the years, but this had not diminished my respect and admiration.

"I was never troubled by any differences between us over politics and governance. Even if they had been conspicuous, I would have ignored them, because our kinship is too valuable to allow transient static to interrupt," he responded in a personal note.

I am pleased to have known two such brothers.

NOTES

¹Bernard Rapoport, *Being Rapoport: Capitalist with a Conscience* (Austin, 2002).